

## STUDY THEME 1B – DECISION MAKING IN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

### Question

Critically examine the view that pressure groups are a threat to democracy. (15 marks)

### Response

The issue of pressure groups in a democracy is one which causes great controversy. Many people take the pluralist view which believes pressure groups are good for democracy however some people will criticise this and argue that they are a threat. In this essay, I intend to critically examine the view that pressure groups are a threat to democracy.

The pluralist view believes that pressure groups are good for a democracy because any modern democracy should encourage a high level of political participation. They also believe that pressure groups give people the chance to express their views and opinions outside elections which are only held every 4-5 years. However, this view is heavily criticised because it suggests all pressure groups are equal when it comes to influencing the government. This is not true as insider groups e.g. BMA tend to have more influence than others, making pressure groups undemocratic.

One way in which pressure groups are good for a democracy is that they provide the government with vital information and expertise when they are making or amending policies e.g. The BMA provides the government with vital information regarding the NHS. However, many people would argue against this saying that this would suggest pressure groups have a major say in policy making decisions but most of the major policy making decisions are made behind closed doors. e.g. At the 2003 "Stop The War Coalition" millions of people throughout the country protested and expressed their concerns about the war in Iraq, however the war still went ahead, proving that pressure groups don't always influence the government and are a threat to a democracy.

The existence of pressure groups gives people the chance to voice their opinion and express their views outwith the general elections. e.g. In 2003 the "Stop The War Coalition" gave millions of people the chance to protest against the war in Iraq. If pressure groups didn't exist, the public would not have been able to express their views until the next general election in 2005, 2 years later, which would therefore mean that pressure groups are good for a democracy. On the other hand, many people would argue that pressure groups who influence the government only represent the privileged in society rather than the disadvantaged. e.g. The BMA represents doctors and surgeons who are already well paid and respected in society. This is not good for a democracy.

Another argument which shows pressure groups do not threaten democracy is that they give minority groups the chance to have their opinions expressed in a more structured way which is more likely to get them noticed by the government. e.g. The 2001 fuel protests gave minority groups such as farmers and lorry drivers, who cannot be without their vehicles, the chance to express concerns about the rising fuel costs. However, it could be argued that pressure groups themselves are undemocratic. The methods used to elect the leaders of pressure groups and the way they collect the views of all the members have been heavily criticised because they often lead to the aims of leaders being met rather than the aims of the party as a whole. e.g. The leadership of the "Snowdrop" campaign created great controversy when statements made were the views of the leaders and not all the members agreed, which therefore proves that pressure groups do threaten democracy.

Another argument against the view that pressure groups threaten democracy is that pressure groups make government more open and effective and are more likely to command public support for the policies made by the government. It could also be argued that they help produce political stability. On the other hand, it is argued that pressure groups create conflict and produce social instability as a result of the activities they encourage. e.g. The Anti-capitalism protests often lead to violence and damage to the properties in the surrounding areas of the protest, this highlights the fact that pressure groups do threaten democracy.

In conclusion, there are many arguments for and against the view that pressure groups threaten democracy. However, I believe that pressure groups do not threaten democracy but encourage political participation as they give people the chance to express their opinions in different ways rather than just voting.

## **Commentary**

This is a well-structured, developed, exemplified and balanced answer that suggests 'A' potential right from the start. There are well-made points on Pluralism, (with further development and exemplification in paragraph four), the provision of information and expertise, the giving of a voice to minority groups, accountability, making government more open and effective and the danger to social stability.

This is a very good answer, but could be further improved by:

- giving outsider group development/exemplification
- making more accurate reference to the BMA, rather than labelling the BMA as representing the privileged in giving its views on Government health policy
- making reference to cause/interest groups
- distinguishing between the acceptable and unacceptable methods used by pressure groups

- explaining how ‘democracy’ comes under threat when social instability threatens the rule of law
- specifying the leadership statements when using the Snowdrop Campaign (1996) as exemplification
- making reference to either Make Poverty History (which certainly does not represent the privileged in society), or Fathers for Justice, or the Countryside Alliance
- including recent decisions/judgements taken to deal with the perceived threat to democracy posed by animal rights extremist groups

However marking instructions must not be regarded as checklists for the perfect answer. This is an ‘A’ response to the question.

**Mark 14/15**